

GUIDANCE AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

SAVING THE FRESHMAN



BY JOYCE V. BROWN

The current educational reform agenda requires that stakeholders in the school community help all students graduate. The U.S. Department of Education's *A Blueprint for Reform: Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* sends all stakeholders a clear message to take action that results in every student completing high school both college and career ready. This message and other reform measures have strong implications for school counselors, who are often excluded from conversations about academic achievement and college and career readiness planning.

If we are to reach the goal of educating every child entering the American school system, school districts must focus their efforts on successfully transitioning freshmen into high school. Statistics reveal that many of our nation's students are not achieving the goal of a high school diploma. Especially in large urban and small rural districts, freshmen often enter high school and fall behind in credits, and then they dropout. Keeping freshmen students on track for graduation must be a priority if we are to meet the demands of a global workforce, which requires that every student obtain, at the very least, a high school diploma. Research informs us about the critical importance of the first year of high school—the ninth grade—since it is the last chance to put students on track to graduate.

The nature of the adolescent learner requires that careful attention be given to the transitional challenges freshmen experience during high school entry. Implementing practices that build student/adult relationships must be an essential component of transition programs if we are to combat the cycle of

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underachievement. School counselors are best suited to lead this effort because their professional training enables them to holistically assist students with identifying personal interests and then formulating interests into concrete college and career plans. The goal is to keep freshmen on track to graduate. The strategy is to establish relationships between ninth-grade students and their high schools, and to help them develop interpersonal relationships with counselors, teachers, principals and other staff members in order to enhance their achievement.

Relationships Matter

One important component of this intentional ninth-grade dropout strategy is the implementation of a counselor-led freshman transition program. The program's focus is building meaningful relationships between entering students and the adults that serve them. Research highlights the importance of relationships and its benefit to student achievement. Achievement is supported and best accomplished when every student is known by at least one caring adult. This fact becomes even more important at the onset of high school entry, when established peer and teacher relationships are disrupted during the transitioning process. The first caring adult that freshmen often

encounter is the school counselor. School counselors are at the core of supporting college and career readiness by providing transition practices centered on appropriate student scheduling and high school orientation activities. School counselors are trained in dealing with students' social/emotional development and possess skills and knowledge to support teaching and learning in order to facilitate student achievement.

Positive student outcomes occur when counselors lead efforts to connect students to their school, students to each other and the families of freshmen students to their new school. Counselors often address these areas during transition programs. Adolescent learners often shun adult guidance and revert to peers for information. It therefore becomes critically important to establish processes that result in establishing open lines of communications between adults and freshmen students.

Since counselors are often the first adult a student meets when entering high school, this encounter must be utilized to support a transition model that is preventive in scope and relational in nature. Far too many programs are introduced after students fail; however, transition programs enable school districts to implement proactive intervention strategies to

provide students and their families with the information necessary to ensure student success. Counselors serve as central figures during students' transition into high school by providing social/emotional and career and academic support; they develop a concrete educational plan that outlines the coursework students must undertake to complete high school both college and career ready.

The Transformed School counseling model tasks counselors to institute interventions and procedures that ensure the equitable access to education for all students. Additionally, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Counseling Model tasks counselors to use data to meet the needs of all students through the delivery of a comprehensive guidance model. It is critically important that students know and connect to school counselors during the important transition phase of high school entry, when freshmen often stumble because they lack knowledge about the school they are entering and do not know the adults who can help them navigate obstacles.

Implementing Strategies that Work

Accomplishing the task of getting all students to be college and career ready can be a paradox because of the impersonal nature of large high schools; not to mention the barriers and challenges of the adolescent development period, which can hinder establishing relationships. To increase high school graduation rates, however, we must get to know students. Most importantly, we must know them before they enter high school if we are to design interventions and strategies to meet their individual needs. There are two strategies that school systems can implement to combat the challenges of high dropout rates and decreased college and career readiness: 1. Help students make a concrete educational plan 2. Provide information through instituting multiple points of contact with freshmen prior to high school entry.

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Help Students Make a Concrete Educational Plan

Integrate A Program Of Study (POS) Into Transition Practices

A POS is the counselor's roadmap for educational planning. It serves as the accountability guide that ensures students understand the multiple pathways to their career aspirations, and the parallel educational requirements and the educational institutions that can help them attain intended goals. The POS serves as a tool to guide and inform all stakeholders in the child's life—including teachers, parents and community partners—about his or her personal aspirations. Most importantly, the POS serves as documentation that every student has knowledge about college and careers and helps school counselors design interventions, strategies and programs to systematically meet student needs. The POS is often an underutilized tool that concretely supports college and career planning.

To be utilized effectively, the POS must be developed, at the very least, during high school entry and must be an integral component of the transition planning process. An effective planning model is based on knowledge counselors have gained about students as a result of relationships formed during transition activities. Such activities help counselors know students and their needs. While counselors often fail to document transition outcomes, research finds that this work must be intentional, and its outcomes must result in guiding students to a path of achievement.

The POS takes the college and career

planning process to a more detailed level since coursework is aligned over a six-year period, and students can be informed about multiple entry and exit points that result in the fulfillment of college and career aspirations. The key element is to establish a framework around which every ninth-grade student is known prior to high school entry. The vision is for school counselors to know:

- 100 percent of freshmen by their first name.
- 100 percent of freshmen career goals.
- 100 percent of freshmen postsecondary aspirations (two-year, four-year, industry certification, military).

To combat high dropout and remediation rates, school systems must provide instruction that meets the individualized learning needs of students. An effective transition program meets the guidelines of *A Blueprint for Reform* by establishing transition practices that remove obstacles to supporting student engagement and achievement, and by implementing strategies that engage families to support the academic success of students. Career readiness requires more than academic preparation, it requires established practices that result in building personalized relationships. A relationship matters because it builds a pathway of trust between a caring adult and a student. Relationships matter in the student achievement process and is often identified as the next 'R' behind rigor and relevance. A plan without personalization is ineffective and personalization without a plan is insuf-

ficient. We must have both in order to ensure student success.

Provide Information through Multiple Points of Contact

Institute the 12-Touch Transition Model

In 2005, Chicago Public Schools' counselors implemented a systematic program of personalized transition practices that sought to provide freshmen student with 12 touches (personalized student contacts) of high school prior to getting there; this was done as part of delivering a comprehensive guidance program to address the aspirations, needs and potential of every student. If we are to effect change within students, we must first know them and know what they need to be successful. In order to know, we must have meaningful contacts in order to build trusting relationships that will enable adults to effectively guide student success.

The 12-Touch model provides a series of activities beginning during the eighth-grade year to ensure that every freshman is well known by a caring adult prior to high school entry. Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs support the transition process by providing information and knowledge to help each student navigate and acquire academic, personal/social, and career skills in order to become successful contributors to the school and community. Most importantly, through establishing a systematic and intentional process of student contact, the college and career aspirations of students are known prior to high school entry. This fact enables school counselors to create concrete educational plans to address student goals.

An Evaluation of the Model's Effectiveness

The effectiveness of these "touches" was documented by a Center For School Counseling Outcome Research study titled, "Paving the Road to College: How School Counselors Help all Students

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Succeed." Findings support a strong correlation between 12-Touch program implementation and college matriculation into two- and four-year colleges, AP enrollment, and AYP scores in schools that implemented this transition practice. Knowing pertinent student information prior to their entry into high school helps support achievement because students are systematically informed about why they are in school, and how to prepare for workforce entry. Most importantly, this model provides students with a system of support to successfully navigate the transition process.

Keeping freshmen on track by supporting their efforts to earn credits in rigorous courses aligned to their career interests is important in creating pipelines of students who are ready to enter college and the workforce. The components of the 12-Touch model are designed to establish multiple contacts with incoming students so they feel the schools they are about to enter care about them. This care comes from counselors, teachers, students and other faculty members. The culture of the school must be focused on high expectations and information, but this work must be done based on a concrete plan—the POS.

The 12-Touch model provides counselors with the opportunity to build, create, implement and deliver a POS by establishing time to implement intentional career planning guidance lessons—during the transition into high school. The 21st century challenge is for school counselors to engage themselves in efforts that

result in student achievement. Ted Sizer states, "You cannot teach kids you do not know." Therefore, school counselors must lead the culture of knowing in order to help students reach their goals. Students respond to adults who establish relationships with them based on knowing their interests and needs. Without relationships, students disengage from school.

Not only do freshmen need instruction, they need a solid educational plan to guide their work! Formulating a transition model with 12 intentional points of contacts prior to high school entry will enable counselors to know the needs of students on day one. Counselors can use this information to collaboratively build schools with a strong college going culture. Great things will occur when we know ninth-grade students. Most importantly, counselors can increase the number of high school graduates who finish their secondary education being both college and career ready by providing a "touch" that both saves and develops human capital: our freshmen! ■

Joyce V. Brown, Ed.D.,

is a National Board Certified Counselor. She is the retired Chicago Public Schools (CPS) District director of secondary school counseling, and currently serves as a counseling consultant within the CPS Office of College and Career Preparation. She can be contacted at JVBrown@cps.k12.il.us.



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